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No solutions on Animas Riverpollutants

Meeting increases public awareness, but discharge continues above Silverton

By Dale Rodebaugh Herald Staff Writer

A meeting in Silverton this week concerning heavy-metal contamination of the Animas River increased public knowledge of the problem but produced no immediate solutions.

"We wanted to bring people up to date on the quality of water in the Animas and why it's getting worse," Peter Butler said Friday. "But any decisions are quite a ways off."

Butler is a member of the Animas River Stakeholders Group and chairman of the Colorado Water Quality Control Commission. He lives in La Plata County.

When Sunnyside Mining Co. ended operations in Silverton in 1991, it negotiated a court decree to plug mine outlet tunnels, including the main access, the American Tunnel, with bulkheads.

But the bulkheads raised the subterranean water level tremendously, increasing pressure that created drainage in nearby mines that had been mostly dry.

Since 2004, when treatment of mine drainage ceased at the American Tunnel, discharge has increased to a total of 700 gallons a minute from other mines in the Gladstone area.

The American Tunnel still discharges 100 gallons a minute.

The water, containing zinc, iron, lead, copper, aluminum, cadmium and manganese, finds its way to Cement Creek and then to the Animas River.

Water quality in the Animas has decreased, Butler said.

The water quality at Bakers Bridge in the north Animas Valley is the worst in 20 years, he said.

The Colorado Division of Wildlife has found a decline in water quality and the number of fish and macroinvertebrates there, he said.

Butler said Gold King No. 7 mine is the biggest metal discharger, releasing about 200 gallons a minute.

The Red and Bonita mine discharges more volume, but metal concentrations are a little less, he said.

The Animas Stakeholders are waiting to see if the federal Environmental Protection Agency scores the Gladstone high enough to become a Superfund site, Butler said.

If a Superfund site is created, the EPA would lead remediation efforts for 10 years, then turn operations over to the state, Butler said.

Butler said various solutions to combat the metal discharge are possible.

"There are several ways or combination of ways to go," Butler said. "But doing nothing is not an option."

Among the solutions, Butler said, are:

- Putting bulkheads in the four biggest dischargers: Mogul, Gold King No. 7, Red and Bonita and the American Tunnel.
- Piping those discharges to a treatment plant.
- Removing the bulkheads in the American Tunnel to drain subterranean water and treat the drainage.
- Creating a demonstration facility using new waste-treatment technology to treat part of the discharge. This would reduce costs but allow the program to expand as funding becomes available.

Treatment plants are not expensive to build, but operating them is.

A major issue is who is going to be responsible and who is going to pay for remediation, Butler said.

"That's part of the reason to explore the Superfund option," Butler said.

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